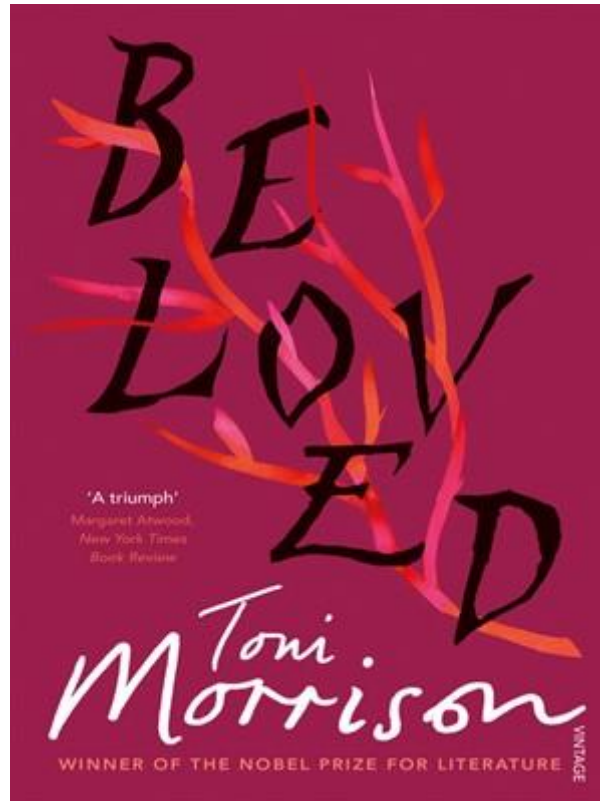


The Legacy of Slavery in *Beloved*

M. Mareeswari, M.A., B.Ed. M.Phil.



Courtesy: <https://img1.od-cdn.com/ImageType-400/0211-1/80D/992/3B/%7B80D9923B-411B-47C3-89AB-72A842020A6F%7DImg400.jpg>

Abstract

Morrison is an outstanding feminist figure in American Modern Literature. All her novels indicate a complete understanding of her character's individual response to the dilemmas posed by racial and sexual identity. The central theme of Morrison's novels deals with the black women characters who are raised from their poor, down trodden and most humiliating position to a new sense of awareness of freedom, liberty and equality in their society. The novel pictures the physical and psychological effects of slavery not only upon women but also the community as a whole. Through the characterisation of Sethe, she brings out the full human meaning and implications of the slave experience. Sethe reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother. Morrison probes deeper into the psychological effects of missing mother-infant bond and unearths the psychological damage of slavery to the mother-

child relationship. The novel points out love as the solution to overcome Sethe's trauma of killing her daughter and her wounds of slavery. The love and acceptance of Paul D and the assistance of the white indentured servant Amy Denver are other representations of love that are crucial to Sethe's possibilities to become a whole individual. Love can also be regarded as the cure to heal the post-slavery racial conflicts. Sethe and Beloved are also to be regarded as symbolic representations and rescuers of the African-Americans from the wounds of slavery. Toni Morrison has made her female protagonists speak not only for themselves but for their whole lot.

Key words: Toni Morrison, legacy of slavery, *Beloved*

Realistic Picture of Black People

Beloved is based on an actual incident she came across in a news clipping which offers a realistic picture of the black life. She found it while editing a collection of articles and images called *The Black Book* in 1974. It contains advertisements chronicling the life of African people in the United States from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement of 1964. Indeed, on the tenth page of *The Black Book* is a copy of a news article entitled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child", which narrated the incident of a slave woman Margaret Garner, a Kentucky slave. In 1850, she attempted to kill her children because she did not want them to suffer as she had in her life. Morrison chose to write on this theme probably because of a feeling that the living conditions were still equally oppressive even at the time of writing the novel. The mother's act was an act of love and courage though it was criminal in the eye of law. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (*Beloved* 164). The novel revolves around this incident and its consequent effect upon the mother whose heart is at times filled with a sense of guilt and remorse. It makes the past unspeakable. The mother who kills the child in the novel is Sethe and her mother-in-law is Baby Suggs. Morrison has invested the narrative with something of the folklore and Biblical allusions, which add layers of meaning to the narrative.

Focus on Collective Rather Than Individual Struggle

Morrison's conscious focus on collective rather than individual struggle is clarified through her repeated assertions that *Beloved* is the story of the people rather than a person.

The book was not about the institution – Slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called Slaves (Angelo 48).

Although the novel begins as Sethe’s story, it evolves into a story about the people who are not aware that they are living in an age of historical interest. They willingly accept their position and they pass everyday happily as father, mother and husband with their children. *Beloved* deals not only with the study of memory but also with the ruined history of the past. Set in post-Civil War Ohio, this haunting narrative of slavery and its aftermath traces the life of a young woman, Sethe, her former life as a slave on Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her children and the tragic events that follow. Morrison also focuses on the difficulties faced by former slaves in keeping the horrors of their pasts submerged within the subconscious. In the words of Ann Snitow, Morrison

[...] twists and tortures [...] and moves the lurid material of melodrama into the middle of her people, where it gets sifted and sorted, lived and relived, until it acquires the enlarging outlines of myth and trauma, dream and obsession (*B* 27).

Story After the End of the Civil War

The novel is set after the end of the Civil War, during the period of so-called Reconstruction (1865-77), when a great deal of random violence was let loose upon blacks. But there are flashbacks to a more distant period, when slavery was still a going concern in the South and the seeds for the bizarre and calamitous events of the novel were sown. The setting is similarly divided: the countryside near Cincinnati, where the central characters have ended up, and a slave-holding plantation in Kentucky, ironically named Sweet Home, from which they fled eighteen years before the novel opens. There are many stories and voices in this novel, but the central one belongs to Sethe, a woman in her mid-thirties, who works as a slave with her husband, Halle. Like other female and male characters, she, too is a victim of sexist and racist oppression. The Garners treated their slaves as ‘men’. “The Garners, [...] ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted” (*Beloved* 140). The death of Garner and the advent of Schoolteacher, a symbol of white patriarchal authority who used coercion and violence to maintain discipline, make life unbearable at Sweet Home. Slave mothers had little control over either their children or the destiny of their family. The masters commonly decide whether a slave woman could marry or not and for how long they can live together. Considering the realistic condition of the slaves’

circumstances, some marriage ceremonies declared the vows valid until death or until distance parted the couple. In *Beloved*, Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has endured the pain of such separations. She had nothing left to make a living with but her heart.

[...] in all of Baby's life, [...] men and women were moved like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers (*B* 23).

For the last five years Sethe's husband Halle had been working every Sunday in order to buy the freedom of his mother, Baby Suggs. Slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" (*B* 87).

On Kentucky plantations, life for the women was filled with emotional as well as physical hardships. Slave women who worked in the fields were separated from their small children, who might be left in the care of older, physically weak women. *Beloved* circles around all these complexities and hints at the different fates of a group of slaves who once lived in this plantation in Kentucky named 'Sweet Home' – of course neither 'sweet' nor 'home'. Among them an old woman called Baby Suggs, her son Halle, Paul A, Paul D, Paul F, Sixo and the one young woman, Sethe. She realized that Sweet Home is "a wonderful lie" (*B* 221). A slave woman was regarded not only as a worker but also a potential breeder of new property, children, who would legally belong to her master. In fact, the masters encouraged childbearing as the primary function of their slave women. They were promised by their owners that if they would bear as many as ten children, they will be given freedom. The masters also took sexual advantage of their female slaves and then regarded any mulatto children that resulted from these forced couplings as slaves and the owners' property. As a result, the Sweet Home slaves plan to run. During the escape, Paul A gets caught and hanged. Sixo gets caught and is burnt alive. Paul F is long gone and sold. Paul D gets caught and sold in chains with a bit in his mouth. Halle was also lost and never to be found again.

The Technique of Leaking Out Incidents

Morrison does not really tell these incidents. Bits and pieces of them leak out between the closed eyelids of her characters. *Beloved*, like Morrison's other novels, begins in the midst of the action, using very little exposition, or setting up of the scene. Events from the past intrude

upon the present constantly. In fact, the novel is set in a period in which all moments of the past exist in the present. In the novel, Sethe's notion of this idea of all time as coexisting simultaneously is expressed in her concept of 'rememory' as she explains it to Denver:

It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm - every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there - you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over - over and done with - it is going to always be there waiting for you. That's [why] I had to get all my children out. No matter (B36).

Expressing Reality through Rememory

Sethe here expresses the notion of time that both structures the novel and explains reality through her 'rememory' as an ex-slave. Beloved represents the troubled past that haunts not only the lives of Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, Paul D and the community but the lives of all African Americans. This troubling past is represented by the word 'rememory' which is used throughout the novel. When Beloved wants to know everything in Sethe's memory, she reveals the story about her life before Sweet Home and her life after Sweet Home when she cut Beloved's throat. Sethe's memory is being wide open by Beloved's presence. Sethe also remembers how her own mother deserted her and allowed to survive. This cycle of mother and daughter fusion, loss, betrayal, understanding and recovery between Sethe and her mother is being played out again in the present relationship between Sethe and Beloved.

Dehumanising Effects

Paul D's rememories throw further light on the dehumanising effects of the institution of slavery. He was to wear an iron collar with three spokes so that he could neither turn nor lie down. Another reminiscence recounts how he was shackled and hitched to a wagon and sold off not once but twice and then chained with forty-six others, and each one was forced to live in a wooden box, five feet deep and five feet wide, fitted into a ditch with a cage like door. Five attempts to 'cut' were foiled, during which he saw runaway slaves "fought owls for food; [...] stole from pigs; [...] buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators" (B 66). Stamp Paid's thoughts go back to the memory of his wife whom he had killed on account of having been used and 'dirtied' by his master. Thus slavery was bad for men but worse for

women. The novel truthfully exposes their vicious exploitation. Working both inside and outside the house, as farmhands, housemaids, nannies and wet nurses, they were hardly ever able to nurse or nurture their own offspring. Every target of frequent sexual abuse, they were looked upon as objects of instant or long-term sexual gratification with absolutely no commitment. Frequent pregnancies only ensured an unfailing supply of slaves that added to the labour force and increased their dollar value as breeders. Paul D, Sethe, Stamp Paid and other slaves belonging to the same owner in Kentucky experience a complete catalogue of barbaric practices and ungodly perversions from all over the South, as well as from Brazil and the West Indies.

An Anti-Christ Figure

The slave master, Schoolteacher, is definitely an Anti-Christ figure. The Anti-Christ signals a return to chaos, and Schoolteacher's arrival produces chaos, which permeates Sethe's life and the lives of everyone in her family and in the entire community. Schoolteacher and the three other white men: his nephew, the slave-teacher and the Sheriff are Morrison's four horsemen of the apocalypse. Their appearance crystallizes the terror of slavery, emphasized by the fact that this episode is the only one in the novel told from the point of view of a white person. When they discover Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar bleeding at her feet, her baby's head nearly severed and her attempt to kill the other infant, Schoolteacher concedes his economic loss. He believes that Sethe would be useless as a slave to him because she has turned insensible due to his nephew having beaten her wildly. Later Amy Denver, the white girl who helps to deliver Sethe's baby, describes the wound as a tree:

It's a tree, Lu. A Chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, [...] these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom (*B* 79).

The Schoolteacher reflects slavery's treatment of African-Americans as animals. "Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white Schoolteacher" (*B* 266). The image of Chokecherry tree on the back of Sethe and the countless such black "song of many thousands gone" keep alive the sufferings of the Afro-American people (Bell 11).

Focus Also on What History Has Omitted

The story is narrated through a series of flashbacks. Morrison is not only concerned with what history has recorded in the slave narrative but what it has omitted, the unspeakable past of the black slave woman. As Sethe tells her story, her memory is “loaded with the past” (B 70). Every mention of “her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (B 58). That is why, Sethe gives short replies to the queries of Denver. Paul D’s visit to Sethe’s house, 124 Bluestone Road, indicates Sethe’s journey into the past. With his arrival, there was “Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes” (B 6). Sethe remembers that though now a haunted house, once “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (B 86-87).

One of the worst effects of historical transition for used-to-be slave mother was alienation and repression. As the author defines it, Sethe’s alienation is not simply the result of a black woman’s separation from the family or her cultural center but also the result of her murdering her own daughter to protect her from living an abject life of a slave. Sethe’s act of killing her daughter is not supported by Baby Suggs. But, in order to provide freedom to her Children, Sethe has no other choice:

That she lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do (B 164).

If a mother is not able to love, protect and provide a good and free life to her children, it would be the most horrifying black experience under slavery. When Paul D comes to know about her crime, he also criticizes her act:

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.” [...]

“You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet (B 165).

After hearing of Sethe’s deed, Paul D leaves 124 and Sethe shuts herself in alone with her daughter:

Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. [...] Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room (*B* 182-83).

Actually, Sethe's act of infanticide, which was considered the worst crime, is discarded not only by Baby Suggs and Paul D but also by the community.

Sethe's Daughter, Denver

Sethe's daughter, Denver, feels neglected and socially cut off because nobody speaks to them, nobody comes to their house any more. It is her grandma, Baby Suggs who taught her to listen to and love her own body. Although "slaves [were] not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own" (*B* 209). She taught Denver to feel pleasure deep down. Though Denver is frightened of Sethe, she wants to be loved by her mother. She wants to be related to her sister, Beloved, whose blood she had engulfed along with her mother's milk. Because it is Sethe, who, having killed Beloved, goes on to nurse her youngest baby, Denver. She is willing to dream of her daddy, Halle, who had disappeared:

Let me dream my daddy better. I always knew he was coming. Something was holding him up. He had a problem with the horse. The river flooded, the boat sank [...] my daddy was coming for me. [...] My daddy was an angel man
(*B* 207-08).

Baby Suggs preaches to all black men and women to love their flesh hard because it is "flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances [...] Love it. Love it hard" (88).

A Narrative of Humiliation – Story of Beloved

Beloved is a narrative of the humiliation of the nineteenth century slave, who murders her daughter just to protect her from a master. Through the stream-of-consciousness technique, Morrison justifies Beloved's appearance, her change in the physical and the emotional form and also her disappearance. After a span of long eighteen years, mysteriously, Sethe's daughter, Beloved, reappears to claim her love. She appears from the water, Morrison describes:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water [...] Nobody saw her emerge or come accidentally by [...] She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands
(*B* 50).

Beloved's major aim to appear in a form of a sensuous woman can be considered a reminder of Sethe's act. She enters her mother's life and destroys her happiness. As soon as Sethe realizes that Beloved is her daughter whom she had killed eighteen years ago, her natural love for her emerges and, just out of guilt, provides everything to her in a very apologetic manner:

The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took [...] Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life (B 241-42).

From Sethe's point of view, Beloved always relates to herself from mother, so does Sethe. Out of terror, guilt and fear, she asks Beloved:

Tell me the truth. Didn't you come from the other side?

Yes. I was on the other side.

You came back because of me?

Yes.

You rememory me?

Yes. I remember you.

You never forgot me?

Your face is mine (B 215).

Right to Protect Own Children from Slavery

Sethe has her own right to protect her children from slavery and the murder is the result of her love for her children. Sethe's original intention was to kill all the four of her children, not just one among them. She thought that slavery was not an alternative to it. She was always conscious of the thought that her children once free would not become slaves again.

I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher (B 163).

Roles of Mother and Daughter Are Reversed

In the final part of the novel, the roles of mother and daughter are reversed. And the job Denver started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved:

Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it (*B* 250).

The community watches silently these scenes of madness. And the craziness of the black world is only matched by the white world's devices. Seeing that her mother's life is in danger, Denver seeks that help of other women of the community to exorcise revengeful Beloved from the house.

Psychological Turmoil

Of course, right from the beginning of the novel, Morrison's method draws our attention to the psychological turmoil experienced by Sethe in the context of slavery. Morrison is interested in documenting the history of the African in slavery. First, all the history that the reader has learned about slavery is sketched out on a giant canvas: the separation of women and children from men; the treatment of slaves both male and female, children and adults – as beasts of burden; the sexual exploitation of African women by European men. Like horses, Paul D and others like him are hitched to wagons with 'bits' in their mouths. Like a cow, Sethe is milked by her slavemasters. Women, children and men are whipped mercilessly. Stamp Paid's wife and Ella became the sexual playthings of the slavemaster. Perhaps the most vicious and cruel of these acts was the dispersal of the race:

Racism

The last of her [Baby Sugg's] children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that; held a little foot; examined that fat fingertips with her own – fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere (*B* 139). Racism is one of the broad fields in *Beloved* under which Blacks are ill-treated in the hands of the white masters. It destroys community cohesion and creates division in the society. Racism consists of ideologies and practices that seek to justify or cause

the unequal distribution of privileges, rights or goods amongst or otherwise exhibit can take the form of social actions or political systems that or inferior to each other, based on inheritable traits, abilities or qualities. It may also hold that members of different races should be treated differently.

The idea of racism emphasises the pain and suffering of the slaves. Sethe's confrontation with evil begins in Sweet Home and it is expelled through the schoolteacher and his nephews. The Sweet Home under Garner and the Sweet Home under the rule of the Schoolteacher are different entities. Sethe is the only female. Through Sethe, the concept of blackness is explicated. Sethe is brutally treated and raped. The Stream of consciousness technique is used to reveal the atrocities and mental trauma Sethe faces in Sweet Home.

Not only women but also the male protagonists struggle in the hands of the white masters. Black men and women were not considered as humans. There are four black male slaves to run Sweet Home. One of them is Paul D, who suffers as a slave in Georgia after his experience in Sweet Home. He also makes an attempt to flee from Sweet Home but he is caught and sold to Brandywine, the man he has tried to kill. The murder attempt leads him to imprisonment. Morrison has made it very clear that Paul D has also suffered a lot from racial victimization. Halle, Sethe's husband is another victim who works for five years for his crippled mother, Baby Suggs, to emancipate. "Usually he worked Saturdays and Sundays to pay off Baby Suggs freedom" (B 35). Even though they work hard they are not able to reap anything as a reward.

Paul D returns to Sethe after eighteen years. Sethe narrates about the events that caused her to run from Sweet Home; about her sons, about the boys who has stolen her breast milk, about the birth of Denver and about the death of her baby girl, Beloved. They recapitulate their lives as slaves under the kindly Garners and under the cruel schoolteacher.

Sethe recounts her whipping and begins to cry in the kitchen as she reveals to Paul D. The tree of scars, the image of chokecherry tree on her back, which decorates the dead skin of her back. It keeps alive the suffering of the African-American people. Paul D asks, What tree on your back? It something growing on your back? I don't see nothing growing on your back. A chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago could have cherries too

now for all I know. (B 10)

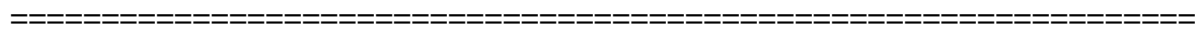
Denver seeks the help of the women who are all around. The woman marches together to the house and perform a collective exorcism:

the voices of women searched for the right combination, the Key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (B 48).

At the end Beloved disappears. Again, Sethe suffers from losing her child and ends up a broken woman. There is hope at the novel's end, when Paul D re-enters, he tells her, "You your own best thing, Sethe you are", "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (B 148)

Motherhood Posture a Problematic Challenge to African American Women

. Motherhood posture a problematic challenge to African American women under the slave regime. The situation, which did not allow mothers the opportunity and freedom to nurture their children or perform their biological role as caregivers and mothers to their children, and especially their female children, had very debilitating consequences on the psyche of the women. Since many African American women writers preoccupy themselves with the bringing back to life the 'dead girl' whose society has willed out of existence, and who male writers have chosen to bury and discard from literary creation, motherhood continues to occupy a distinctively prominent place in the African American literature by women. In the novel, Beloved's mother (Sethe) undergoes a torturous journey (symbolic) in order to reconstruct the meaning of her life as a woman and mother. This symbolic journey interrogates both morality and convention, and the ideological structures of racism, which implicated the woman. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel by a woman, about women, which mobilizes the narrative form of heroism in the African American fictional world.



Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:2 February 2017

M. Mareeswari, M.A., B.Ed. M.Phil.

The Legacy of Slavery in *Beloved*

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Adhikari, Madhumalati. "The Female Protagonist in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *The Literary Half – Yearly* 37.1 (Jan 1996).

Adhikari, Madhumalathi. "Re-organizing the Lies of Women" Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *The Literary Criterion* 34.3 (1999).

Askelond, Lori. "Remodeling the Model Home in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Beloved*." Rev. of *Remodeling the Model Home in Uncle Tom's Cabin and Beloved*. *American Literature* 64.4 (December 1992).

Aston, N.M. *Dalit Literature and African American Literature: Literature of Marginality*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.

Aubry, Timothy. "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for Paradise on the Oprah Winfrey Show". *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (Sum 2006).

Babu, Arun. "Retrieving History from National Amnesia: a New Historical Approach to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literatures* 13.2 (Dec 2013).

Chakravarthy, Joya. *Indian Writing in English: Perspectives*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003.

Dhawan, R.K. *Afro - American Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.

Dhawan, R.K. *Feminism and American Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996.

Dittamar, Linda. "Borde Crossings: Multicultural Perspectives on Women Writers". *Revaluations* 1.3 (Autumn 1995).

Gupta, Monika, *Women Writers in the Twentieth Century Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000.

Kagal, Carmen. "Intricate and Twisting Paths". Rev. of *Paradise*. *Indian Review of Books* 20.9 (May 7 1998).

McLeod, A. L. *Commonwealth and American Nobel Laureates in Literature: Essays in Criticism*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1998.

Neilen, Deirdre. Rev. of *Paradise*. *World Literature Today* 72.4 (Autumn 1998).

Robolin, Stephane. "Loose Memory in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (Sum 2006).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:2 February 2017

M. Mareeswari, M.A., B.Ed. M.Phil.

The Legacy of Slavery in *Beloved*

Storage, Patricia. "The Scripture of Utopia." Rev. of *Paradise. : The New York Review of Books* 45.10 (Jun 11 1998).

M. Mareeswari, M.A., B.Ed. M.Phil.

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sri Kaliswari College

Virudhunagar Main Road

Sivakasi 626123

Tamilnadu

India

amkartheeswari@gmail.com